

INTERCOLLEGIATE SPORT

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Survival of the (Fiscally) Fittest: Financing College Athletics in the 1930s

In January 1931, the New York Times reported that “college athletics in general and football in particular, still suffering somewhat from the growing pains of super salesmanship and ballyhoo, have been abruptly brought to face with somewhat critical conditions for 1931.” This paper will address the question of how college athletic officials adjusted their programs and their priorities to meet the unique challenges of the Depression. After overseeing a decade of unprecedented growth in college athletics’ popularity and in athletic infrastructure, these athletic leaders had to confront a period of sharply declining revenue and at least the possibility of a similar decline in public interest. On the whole, they managed the crisis adroitly, so that by the 1940s big-time college athletic programs were on much firmer footing than ever before.

This paper will draw upon research conducted from my recently completed dissertation, entitled “A Competitive Business: The Ideologies, Cultures, and Practices of Men’s and Women’s College Sports During the Depression.” Using published sources and the archives of the University of California, University of Tennessee, University of Texas, University of Maryland, and Ohio State University, the paper would provide a national perspective on the financing of college athletics during the Depression. This selection of institutions insures not only regional and athletic conference balance, it also offers a glimpse at the entire range of “big-time” athletic programs. For example, while California and Ohio State had become accustomed to athletic income totals exceeding \$600,000 per year by the end of the 1920s, the University of Maryland hoped to average only \$2,000-2,500 per football contest. Texas and Tennessee resided in the middle of this revenue spectrum. A focused examination of the different levels of “big time” intercollegiate athletic operations will help create a more nuanced understanding of just how diverse this classification actually was in the 1930s.
